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ABSTRACT

Today, after nearly 100 years of pressure toward consolidation, communities which have resisted consolidation for the last generation are finally getting some support. Some of this support comes from simple facts and figures. There is strong evidence that centralized schools are expensive, remote from the communities they are supposed to serve, and not especially satisfactory to teachers, parents, or students. Today, policy makers seem to be recognizing that rural America has its own unique and desirable qualities. This has been translated into a newly receptive environment for people concerned with rural issues, and especially for those interested in small-scale, community-based solutions to general rural problems. Since it would appear that the eighties will be a fertile decade for people devoted to the improvement of rural education, there are three clear areas which are critically in need of work: basic research on small school problems, practices, and unique features; curriculum and program development which builds on those unique features, and which makes use of children's rural life experiences; and the elaboration and implementation of models for funding and regulating small rural schools. Much of the burden for this work is going to devolve on people such as the members of PURE (People United for Rural Education). However, once this pioneer work has been done, it can be adapted to the needs and uses of other rural communities. (NQ)

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SMALL-SCALE RURAL EDUCATION: PROSPECTS FOR THE EIGHTIES

By: Faith Dunne *

It was all so much easier twenty years ago. Twenty years ago, everyone knew what was right for rural education. Get rid of those small schools, which are inefficient, expensive, instructionally limited, and inadequate to prepare children for modern life. Replace those pathetic institutions with consolidated schools -- the kind of long, low, flat-roofed building that perches uneasily on former wheat-fields and cow pastures from Maine to Texas. Trade in the hodge-podge classrooms with children of all different ages; trade in the poorly trained, overworked, badly paid teachers. Get in return gleaming multi-purpose rooms, fully-equipped chemistry labs, reading specialists, full-time librarians. Who could question the value of such a trade?

Certainly, the consolidation process takes longer in some places than in others. There are parts of the country where the population is inconveniently sparse, and other places where rough terrain makes consolidation difficult. And, believe it or not, there are places where the people are just so pig-headed that they won't admit the overwhelming value of large unit size. But rev up the big yellow buses, and send out the troops from the State Department of Education (armed with some strong legislation to back them up) and even the most pig-headed will soon come around.

Or will they? Today, after nearly 100 years of pressure towards consolidation, there are still communities saying "Wait a minute" to the advocates of large schools and larger districts. And, unlike twenty years ago, they are now organizing and making their voices heard. PURE is one such organization, but it is not alone. Farmers in Nebraska are banding together to fight the "county-type school districting" advocated by the Great Plains School District Organization Project. In Wiscasset, Maine, parents are meeting informally to explore the possibility of de-consolidating a school system which has been centralized for more than a decade. In Kermit, West Virginia, parents have started the Big Laurel community school to save their children from an endless daily bus ride to a town school where they were teased for being "hillbillies."

And, across America, communities which have resisted consolidation for the last generation are finally getting some support. Some of this support comes from simple facts and figures. Consolidation has not been proven to be the "One Best System" that would solve the problems of rural education. There is strong evidence that centralized schools are expensive, remote from the communities they are supposed to serve, and not especially satisfactory to teachers, parents, or students. Further, there is at least a powerful suggestion that some of the best qualities of rural schooling have been lost in the rush to size and grandeur.

Today, for the first time in living memory, professional researchers and policy makers seem to be recognizing that rural America has its own unique and desirable qualities. This is reflected in the funding patterns of foundations and the federal government. After more than a decade of

narrow (if mostly futile) focus on the problems of cities, the policy-makers seem at last to be recognizing that there really is something out there between the airports. This has been translated into a newly receptive environment for people concerned with rural issues, and especially for those interested in small-scale, community-based solutions to general rural problems. The Assistant Secretary of Education is considering launching a "rural initiative" backed by funds for rural school support. The Labor Department is now actively interested in the work problems of rural men and women who have no desire for urban re-location. And the National Institute of Education has just funded a major study of rural school improvement projects, which will focus on those programs which most successfully enabled local districts to solve their own problems.

These programs and plans are just the beginning. It would appear that the eighties will be a fertile decade for people devoted to the improvement of rural education. But we must not forget that current interest, while strong, is likely to be fleeting. Fads in education come and go -- urban schools were "in" during the sixties and early seventies, and it is unlikely that the growing support for small-scale rural education will last much longer than the urban commitment did. Those of us who will continue to care about small rural schools when the whims of fashion have gone elsewhere must seize this opportunity to do some work that we cannot do unsupported.

What needs to be done? Small schools in rural areas have been so beleaguered and neglected for the past generation that the answer is "practically everything." But there are three clear areas which are critically in need of work: basic research on small school problems, practices, and unique features; curriculum and program development which builds on those unique features, and which makes use of childrens' rural life experiences; and the elaboration and implementation of models for funding and regulating small rural schools.

Basic research may sound remote from the immediate needs of rural community schools. But it is critical to their survival. Most of the arguments against small rural schools are based in statistical data (sometimes poorly interpreted, but numbers nevertheless) which obscure the distinctive qualities of the community-based school. Rural people, if they are to convince legislators and State Department of Education people to encourage small schools, will have to have some high-quality differentiated research which lays out the positive features and the specific problems of community-based small schools. Most defenders of small schools have had to rely on emotional appeal and myth; neither of these is either adequate or necessary.

Rural curriculum and program development is as important as the basic research. One perennial problem in rural schools is the lack of suitable curriculum. In Bradford, Vermont, the high school students study Black History, but not the development of agribusiness, in Appalachia, poor mountain children learn to read from books which are all about subways, fire hydrants, and tall buildings. There are good reasons for this. Commercial publishers are not especially interested in rural curriculum. Rural areas vary more than cities do, and it is not as easy to install

uniform curricula in country schools. Besides, there is no money in rural education -- why produce a book that will sell only a few thousand copies when you can produce one which will sell out several editions? This means that rural communities must begin to create their own materials, based in their needs and with immediate relevance to their children. These curricula and programs need to be developed, tested, and shared with other small schools, creating a kind of curriculum network which could benefit a wide range of communities.

Finally, funding and regulation models must be designed which incorporate a recognition that small rural schools are important and need to be supported. Twin pressures bear down on today's rural schools: first, state aid formulae which favor institutions with large enrollments; second, federal and State Department of Education regulations which sometimes seem intended to force small schools into non-compliance. It is crucial that alternative models be designed which would allow small rural schools to develop along their own paths, while still providing the highest quality of education for children.

Much of the burden for this work is going to devolve on people such as the members of PURE. Much of rural America is poor -- very poor -- and many of the people who want to save their small schools have neither the resources nor the energy to lead the battles. It is up to the more prosperous rural communities to take this leadership role, to encourage the research, initiate the curriculum development process, formulate the models for funding and regulation. Once this pioneer work has been done, it can be adapted to the needs and uses of other rural communities. But it must be started somewhere. How about Iowa?

*Paper presented at the First Annual State Convention of People United for Rural Education (PURE), 2-3 February 1978, Des Moines, Iowa.